

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PARIS 03063

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, FR
SUBJECT: ELECTIONS 1978: A CENTER/LEFT GOVERNMENT --
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AN OPTION FOR FRANCE?

SUMMARY. SPECULATION OVER A CENTER/LEFT COALITION
AFTER THE MARCH LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS HAS BEEN INCREAS-
ING SINCE THE FAILURE OF THE LEFT SUMMIT IN LATE
SEPTEMBER. HARDLY A DAY GOES BY WHEN SOME SUPPORTER
OF THE PRESIDENT DOESN'T CITE A PROPHETIC PASSAGE IN

HIS "DEMOCRATIE FRANCAISE" AND EXTEND THE LESSON TO THE CHANCES OF THE CENTER/LEFT. CALLS BY PRIME MINISTER BARRE, REPUBLICAN PARTY LEADER SOISSON AND CENTRIST PRESIDENT LECANUET TO EXPAND THE MAJORITY ARE READ IN THIS LIGHT, ESPECIALLY BY THE GAULLISTS. BUT THE REALITIES OF THE PROBABLE RESULTS OF THIS MARCH'S ELECTIONS (REGARDLESS OF THE WINNER), ROOTED IN FAIRLY ENTRENCHED POSITIONS BY THE MAIN POLITICAL PARTIES, ARGUE AGAINST SUCH AN OUTCOME. A CENTER/LEFT COALITION MAY BE A MATHEMATICAL POSSIBILITY, AND IN VARIOUS PARTY COMBINATIONS, BUT THE COALITION WOULD BE LIKELY TO BE SO FRAGILE AND FRAUGHT WITH SO MANY CONTRADICTIONS THAT THE TEMPTATION WILL PROBABLY PROVE QUITE RESISTIBLE. NEVERTHELESS, EVEN THOUGH THE PARTIES WILL REMAIN MORE OR LESS FIXED IN THEIR PRESENT POSITIONS DURING THE CAMPAIGN, THE PERIOD FOLLOWING THE ELECTIONS WILL WITNESS CONSIDERABLE MANEUVERING, NOT LEAST BY THE PRESIDENT, WHICH COULD LEAD TO A VERY DIFFERENT SITUATION AND A GREAT NUMBER OF OPTIONS THAT DO NOT EXIST TODAY. IT CANNOT BE COMPLETELY RULED OUT THAT, PRESENT LOGIC ASIDE, ENOUGH POLITICAL LEADERS WILL FIND THE GISCARDIAN OPTION WORTH A TRY SOMETIME AFTER NEXT MARCH TO BRING ABOUT A HISTORICAL CHANGE IN ALLIANCES. BUT THE GUESS HERE IS THAT A CENTER/LEFT GOVERNMENT IS NOT IN THE CARDS FOR FRANCE, AT LEAST NOT SOON. END SUMMARY.

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1. THE THEORY: NINE MONTHS AGO, AFTER THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS WHICH SAW THE LEFT PICK UP AN ADDITIONAL 57 OF THE 221 CITIES OVER 30,000 POPULATION, A FAVORITE QUESTION (OR JOKE, DEPENDING ON THE SPEAKER) WAS: DOES THE CENTER STILL EXIST? COVETED BY THE REPUBLICAN PARTY, RAIDED BY THE SOCIALISTS AND CONTINUALLY DIVIDED AMONG RIVAL PARTY LEADERS, THE ELECTORATE OF THE CENTER FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRATS (CDS) AND RADICAL SOCIALISTS (RS) HAS DIPPED FROM A HEALTHY 10 PERCENT TO AN ESTIMATED 5 PERCENT TODAY. PARADOXICALLY, THIS DECLINE HAS COINCIDED, ESPECIALLY SINCE THE LEFT SPLIT IN LATE SEPTEMBER, WITH A GREAT DEAL OF SPECULATION OVER THE CHANCES OF A CENTER/LEFT COALITION AFTER NEXT MARCH'S LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS. TRUE, THE THEORY GOES, THE CENTER ELECTORATE MAY BE INSIGNIFICANT, BUT WITH THE NEAR BREAK-UP ON THE LEFT, THE PARTIES OF THE CENTER/LEFT COULD FORM A RELATIVELY STABLE COALITION (WHICH WOULD INCLUDE OF COURSE GISCARD'S REPUBLICAN PARTY, CURRENTLY POLLING ABOUT 16 PERCENT), CONSOLIDATE A CENSUS OF OPINION REPRESENTING WELL OVER 50 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION AND RELEGATE THE GAULLIST

AND COMMUNIST EXTREMES TO THE OPPOSITION. TWO RECENT
SIGNS POINT UP THE ACTUALITY OF THE IDEA:

A NEW EDITION OF "DEMOCRATIE FRANCAISE" WAS
PUBLISHED IN EARLY JANUARY WITH A NEW
PREFACE BY THE PRESIDENT, IN WHICH HE WROTE:
"EVEN IF IT IS NOT CLOSE, THE TIME WILL COME WHEN
IT WILL BE POSSIBLE TO CONDUCT THE DEBATE IN
NON-PASSIONATE TERMS, WHEN IT WILL DEAL WITH
DIFFERENCES AND NOT WITH OPPOSITIONS, WHEN THE

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FRENCH WILL UNDERSTAND THAT THEY ARE NOT AS
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SEPARATED IN THEIR IDEAS AS THEY HAVE BEEN LED TO BELIEVE, THAT THEY CAN IN ANY CASE DIALOGUE DEMOCRATICALLY AND UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER ON A BODY OF COMMON PROPOSITIONS." THIS PASSAGE WAS WIDELY INTERPRETED AS AN APPEAL TO THE SOCIALISTS TO REJOIN THE MAINSTREAM OF FRENCH POLITICS, DROP THE COMMUNISTS AND WORK WITH THE CENTER-ORIENTED PARTIES.

-- A NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR POLL SHOWED THAT 43 PERCENT OF THE FRENCH PEOPLE BELIEVE THERE WILL BE A DEFINITIVE BREAK BETWEEN THE PCF AND PC IN 1978 (34 PERCENT DID NOT BELIEVE IN A BREAK AND 23 PERCENT NO OPINION). 46 PERCENT (AGAINST 32 PERCENT, 22 PERCENT NO OPINION) FORESAW A GISCARDIAN/SOCIALIST COALITION. A SEPARATE POLL BY THE SAME MAGAZINE ASKING VOTER PREFERENCE FOR THE TYPE OF GOVERNMENT DESIRED AFTER MARCH SHOWED 41 PERCENT IN FAVOR OF SOME COMBINATION OF THE CENTER/LEFT PARTIES. 40 PERCENT OF THE SOCIALISTS FAVORED THIS ROUTE, 57 PERCENT OF THE PR, WHILE THE PC WAS HOSTILE AND THE RPR UNENTHUSIASTIC. THE 59 PERCENT PREFERRING ANOTHER RESULT WERE DIVIDED AS FOLLOWS: UNION OF THE LEFT (23 PERCENT), MINORITY SOCIALIST GOVERNMENT (11 PERCENT), PRESENT MAJORITY (15 PERCENT) AND OTHER OR NO OPINION (10 PERCENT).

THE CENTER/LEFT THEORY, OBVIOUSLY CLOSE TO GISCARD'S HEART, IS TEMPTING, AND GIVEN THE MOVING SANDS OF FRENCH POLITICS FOR THE NEXT YEAR, CANNOT BE RULED OUT (IF FOR NO OTHER REASON THAN THAT GISCARD BELIEVES IN IT). BUT IT COMES UP AGAINST SOME DIFFICULT OBSTACLES WHICH LEAD US TO CONCLUDE THAT SUCH AN OUT-
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COME APPEARS AT THIS WRITING UNLIKELY, EVEN FOR THE PERIOD FOLLOWING NEXT MARCH.

2. THE FACTS: ANY CENTER/LEFT CRYSTAL-BALLGAZER

HAS TO START WITH FIGURES, THAT IS, SEATS IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. FOR PURPOSES OF ILLUSTRATION WE HAVE CHOSEN TWO SETS OF FIGURES, ONE ASSUMING A DOMINANT RPR IN THE MAJORITY AND THE OTHER AN RPR MUCH REDUCED BY PS GAINS. THESE MAY BE PRESENTED (GROSSLY OVERSIMPLIFIED) AS FOLLOWS:

CASE I:

RPR (140 SEATS) PR (80), CENTER/REFORMATEUR (50)
TOTAL 270
PS/MRG (140) PC (80)
TOTAL 220

CASE II:

RPR (100) PR (60) CENTER/REFORMATEUR (40)
TOTAL 200
PS/MRG (180) PC (100) OTHER LEFT (10)
TOTAL 290

STICKING STRICTLY TO THE FIGURES, WE SEE THAT IN THE FIRST CASE 130 CENTER DEPUTIES WOULD NEED 116 SOCIALISTS TO CONSTITUTE A MAJORITY COALITION, AND IN THE SECOND CASE 180 PS WOULD NEED 66 CENTRISTS. THE ARTIFICIALITY OF SUCH CALCULATIONS CAN BE SEEN BY LOOKING AT ONLY THEIR MOST OBVIOUS IMPLICATIONS. THE FIRST CASE IMPLIES:

-- PS DEPUTIES, AFTER RUNNING ON ONE PROGRAM (AT LEAST THE 1972 COMMON PROGRAM, IF NOT AN UPDATED VERSION), WOULD PRESUMABLY FEEL FREE TO CHANGE THEIR MINDS ONCE ELECTED, A DISHONEST IF NOT UNPRECEDENTED COURSE OF ACTION IN FRENCH PARLIAMENTARY TRADITION;

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-- THE PS WOULD SPLIT, WITH 116 OF ITS 140 DEPUTIES JOINING THE CENTER, AN ACTION WHICH WOULD GO AGAINST EIGHT YEARS OF MODERN SOCIALIST HISTORY AND DISCIPLINE;
-- LARGE NUMBERS OF PS DEPUTIES WOULD BE WILLING TO JOIN A COALITION DOMINATED BY THE PR/CENTER, EVEN THOUGH THE PS WOULD BE BY FAR THE LARGEST SINGLE PARTY OF THE THREE COALITION PARTNERS; OR THAT
-- ALTERNATIVELY, A COALITION OF THE CENTER AND 116 PS DEPUTIES MIGHT BE FORMED, NOT ON THE BASIS OF ONE OR THE OTHER'S PROGRAM BUT ON A COMPROMISE PROGRAM. THIS SOLUTION, WHILE CONCEPTUALLY

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APPEALING, WOULD LIKELY SUFFER THE FORTUNES OF
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ANY LEAST COMMON-DENOMINATOR APPROACH: AN UN-
INSPIRING PROGRAM, DIFFUSE LEADERSHIP AND
INSUFFICIENT GRASS ROOTS SUPPORT.

THE SECOND CASE CARRIES WITH IT EQUALLY DIFFICULT
IMPLICATIONS FOR EACH OF THE PARTIES, NAMELY:

- HAVING RECEIVED ENOUGH SUPPORT FROM THE PC TO
ARRIVE AT 180 SEATS, THE PS WOULD HAVE LITTLE
MOTIVATION TO LOOK ELSEWHERE THAN THE PC FOR
COALITION PARTNERS.
- BY THE SAME TOKEN, TO JOIN WITH THE CENTER, THE
PS WOULD HAVE TO BE WILLING TO MAKE THE IN-
EVITABLE PROGRAMMATIC COMPROMISES, AFTER HAVING
RUN AND BEEN ELECTED ON THE 1972 COMMON PROGRAM;
- IF THE PS DECIDED ON A CENTER ALLIANCE OVER AN
ALLIANCE WITH THE PC, IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT IT
COULD HOLD TOGETHER MOST OF ITS DEPUTIES IN SUCH
A SCHEME:
- AND THE CENTER/LEFT IDEA ASSUMES THAT ABOUT 66
PR AND CENTRIST DEPUTIES WOULD BE WILLING TO
PARTICIPATE IN A GOVERNMENT DOMINATED BY THE PS.

3. THE POLITICS: THE FIRST PROBLEM OF THE CENTER/LEFT
THEORY IS THE LIKELIHOOD OF RPR STRENGTH VIS-A-VIS
THE CENTER, WHOEVER WINS THE ELECTION. ANALYSTS MAY
DIFFER ON THE EXACT SEAT COUNT, BUT THEY ALL AGREE THAT
THE REVITALIZED GAULLIST PARTY UNDER JACQUES CHIRAC'S
LEADERSHIP WILL REMAIN THE LARGEST COMPONENT OF THE
MAJORITY (IT NOW HAS 174 DEPUTIES). INDEED MOST WOULD
AGREE THAT IF THE PRESENT MAJORITY WINS NEXT MARCH,
IT WILL BE LARGELY DUE TO THE SUCCESS OF RPR CANDIDATES,
ORGANIZATION AND MONEY. TWO FURTHER COMPLICATIONS
WILL PROVE PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT: THE LACK OF
COHESION IN THE CENTER AND THE OPPOSITE SITUATION IN
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THE RPR. THE ABOVE HYPOTHETICAL CASES CAN WORK ONLY
IF, AS IS TOO EASILY ASSUMED, THE REPUBLICAN, CDS,
RADICAL SOCIALIST AND STRAY INDEPENDENT DEPUTIES WORK
IN CONCERT. HOWEVER, THESE ARE PRECISELY THE
PARTIES WHICH ARE MOST RIVEN WITH POLITICAL
CONTRADICTIONS AND PERSONAL RIVALRIES. WHILE GISCARD
IS GENERALLY CREDITED WITH BEING A MAN WHO GENUINELY
SEEKS REFORM, HIS PARTY CONTAINS SOME OF THE MOST
CONSERVATIVE ELEMENTS ON THE FRENCH POLITICAL SPECTRUM,
AS TO A LESS EXTENT DOES EACH OF THE OTHER CENTER
PARTIES. WHETHER THESE DEPUTIES WOULD BE WILLING
TO TREAT WITH THE PS DEVIL, EVEN ON GISCARD'S URGING,
IS A VERY OPEN QUESTION, AS IS THE POSSIBILITY OF
PARTICIPATION BY NON-ALIGNED DEPUTIES (CNIP AND OTHERS)
IN THE MAJORITY WHO HAVE MOVED CLOSER TO THE GAULLISTS

SINCE THE CREATION OF THE RPR. FINALLY, THE JEALOUSIES AND PETTY BICKERING WHICH HAVE EXISTED BETWEEN RADICAL SOCIALIST LEADER SERVAN-SCHREIBER AND LECANUET FOR YEARS MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE THEM AS THE CORE, OR EVEN ONE OF THE POLES, AROUND WHICH A NEW COALITION IS TO BE FORMED.

4. SIMILAR TENSIONS, AS NOTED ABOVE, WOULD BE FELT IN THE PS. AN AGREEMENT WITH THE CENTER, ON ANY TERMS OTHER THAN NEAR TOTAL ACCEPTANCE OF THE PS PROGRAM, WOULD MEAN THE EFFECTIVE DEMISE OF THE NEW (AS DISTINCT FROM THE SFIO) SOCIALIST PARTY. NOT ONLY WOULD THE PARTY SPLIT, PERHAPS INTO MANY PIECES, BUT SOME FACTIONS (CERES FOR ONE) WOULD PROBABLY JOIN WITH THE PCF TO RECONSTITUTE THE NEW FRENCH LEFT. THIS LEFT WOULD PROBABLY BE DOMINATED BY THE PCF, THE PCF WOULD THEN REPRESENT LEGITIMACY ON THE LEFT AND THE COMMUNISTS WOULD HAVE A CHANCE TO RECAPTURE GROUND THEY HAVE LOST TO THE PS OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS. THE PS TURNED CENTRIST, ON THE OTHER HAND WOULD HAVE LOST ITS CREDIBILITY ON THE LEFT AND

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COULD START ITS SLOW SLIDE TO ITS MINIMAL ELECTORATE OF 1969 (WHEN THE SOCIALIST LEADER DEFFERRE WON ONLY 5 PERCENT OF THE VOTE IN A PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN EMPHASIZING CENTRISM).

5. FOR THESE VARIOUS REASONS, ONE WOULD EXPECT DEFECTIONS FROM BOTH SIDES, REFUSALS TO GO ALONG FROM PARTS OF BOTH THE CENTER AND THE PS. AND GIVEN THE HIGHLY UNLIKELY POSSIBILITY OF RECRUITING PC DEPUTIES FOR SUCH AN ADVENTURE, THE CENTER/LEFT MIGHT HAVE TO LOOK FOR HELP FROM THE RPR TO FORM A MAJORITY OF 246 DEPUTIES, PARTICULARLY FROM THE RPR'S TRADITIONALLY MORE PROGRESSIVE WING. BUT THE PROSPECTS HERE MUST BE CONSIDERED QUITE DIM ALSO, IF

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PRESENT ATTITUDES IN THE PARTY ARE ANY GUIDE TO
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FUTURE BEHAVIOR. FOR ALL OF CHIRAC'S ABRASIVENESS
AND PERSONALIZED LEADERSHIP, THERE HAS BEEN REMARKABLY
LITTLE OPPOSITION OR DISSENSION TO HIS DIRECTION OR
POLICIES SINCE DECEMBER OF 1976. THERE MAY HAVE BEEN
SOME INITIAL MISGIVINGS FROM PART OF THE OLD GUARD
AND FROM A FEW OF THE YOUNG DEPUTIES WHO RESENTED
THE MINOR ROLE OF GAULLIST DEPUTIES IN THE RPR
MACHINE AND WHO NEED GISCARDIAN AND CENTRIST VOTES
TO GET REELECTED; BUT THIS MUTED CRITICISM HAS FOR
MONTHS BEEN CALMED (EXCEPT FOR CHABAN-DELMAS), AND

PRACTICALLY EVERY RPR FIGURE WE ENCOUNTER GIVES HIS UNDYING SUPPORT TO THE PARTY AND ITS LEADER AS THE BEST HOPE TO BEAT THE LEFT NEXT MARCH. NEVERTHELESS, IT IS CONCEIVABLE THAT IF RPR FORTUNES WERE TO SINK TO A LOW OF 100 SEATS (CASE II), THE DEFEAT WOULD BE CONSIDERED A PERSONAL ONE FOR CHIRAC AND DEFECTIONS COULD ENSUE. ALTERNATIVELY, ONE COULD ARGUE THAT THE SURVIVORS, IN ORDER TO PRESERVE WHAT LIMITED ROLE REMAINS FOR THE PARTY AS WELL AS ITS FUTURE, WOULD CHOOSE TO RALLY AROUND THE GRAND PRINCIPLES OF GAULLISM RATHER THAN SPLINTER.

6. PRESENT REALITIES VERSUS FUTURE SPECULATION:
THE ABOVE DISCUSSION IS OBVIOUSLY VERY SPECULATIVE, BUT IS NECESSARILY SO BY THE VERY NATURE OF THE UNCLEAR POLITICAL LANDSCAPE TODAY, BY THE AMOUNT OF CURRENCY GIVEN IN SOME INFLUENTIAL QUARTERS TO A CENTER/LEFT SOLUTION THESE DAYS, BY THE FACT THAT (POLITICS ASIDE) OVER 50 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE PROBABLY ACTUALLY DOES WANT TO VOTE SOMEWHERE IN THE CENTER, AND BY THE GISCARDIAN FACTOR. IF GISCARD HAS BEEN SO PROPHETIC (OR LUCKY) UP TO NOW REGARDING THE INHERENT CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN THE PS AND PC,
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SHOULDN'T HE BE LISTENED TO MORE CAREFULLY WITH RESPECT TO FRANCE'S GRADUAL EVOLUTION TOWARD THE CENTER/LEFT, WITH ROOM FOR AN ALTERNANCE OF POWER WITHIN THESE LIMITS? SOME OBSERVERS FORESEE JUST SUCH A SOLUTION, PERHAPS NOT RIGHT AFTER NEXT MARCH, BUT MORE LIKELY FOLLOWING ON A PRECARIOUS POST-MARCH GOVERNMENT AND NEW LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS WITHIN THE YEAR. THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE COULD CHANGE, FOR EXAMPLE, IF AFTER A LEFT VICTORY THE SOCIALISTS EITHER HAD TO GOVERN WITHOUT THE COMMUNISTS OR ELSE FOUND THE PC SUCH A DIFFICULT COALITION PARTNER THAT THEY SOUGHT ANOTHER ALTERNATIVE. SOME NAMES CITED IN CONNECTION WITH A TRANSITION PERIOD ARE EDGAR FAURE, SIMONE VEIL AND RAYMOND BARRE, ALL OF WHOM ARE CONSIDERED INDIVIDUALS NOT OVERLY IDENTIFIED WITH A PARTICULAR PARTY AND WHO MIGHT BE ABLE TO APPEAL TO A BROAD SPECTRUM OF THE PUBLIC. NO ONE OF COURSE CAN ANSWER THE GISCARDIAN RIDDLE TODAY. BUT IT IS TRUE THAT THERE IS MORE RECOGNITION NOW THAN AT ANY TIME IN THE PAST THAT THE PRESIDENT WAS MORE CLAIRVOYANT THAN MOST PEOPLE GAVE HIM CREDIT FOR. AND THERE ARE MANY TODAY WHO WOULD NOT RULE OUT OF HAND WHAT SOME HAVE CYNICALLY CALLED "HIS ANGLO-SAXON SOLUTION TO A LATIN PROBLEM."

7. THE ONE ELEMENT THAT SHOULD DEFINITELY NOT BE

RULED OUT AFTER MARCH IS THE UNEXPECTED, FOR EXPERIENCE
IS SHOWING THAT IT IS PROVING MORE DIFFICULT
TO PREDICT THE POST-MARCH GOVERNMENT COLORATION
THE CLOSER ONE APPROACHES THE ELECTIONS. THERE ARE
A NUMBER OF FACTORS WHICH CANNOT BE PINNED DOWN NOW
BUT WHICH WILL HAVE A BEARING ON THE SITUATION
SOME MONTHS FROM NOW. THE SEAT DISTRIBUTION IN
THE ASSEMBLY, TO PICK JUST ONE EXAMPLE, WILL CERTAINLY
BE DIFFERENT THAN IT IS TODAY, PERHAPS CLOSER THAN
INDICATED IN THE TWO CASES IN PARAGRAPH TWO. A
CLOSER RACE WOULD GIVE GISCARD MORE OPTIONS AND
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MANEUVERING ROOM. BUT IT COULD ALSO POSE HIM THE
DILEMMA OF WHAT IS CALLED IN FRANCE "THE
UNFINDABLE GOVERNMENT."
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